DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 307 881 IR 052 769

AUTHOR Scott, W. W.
TITLE Telephone Reference Services in University Libraries: A Survey of Service to Students.
PUB DATE May 88
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Session of the Annual Meeting of the Illinois Library Association (May 11-13, 1988).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Libraries; *College Students; Guidelines; Higher Education; Library Research; Questionnaires; *Reference Services; Telephone Communications Systems; Users (Information)
IDENTIFIERS *Association of College And Research Libraries; *Telephone Reference Service

ABSTRACT

A survey of 96 Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) member libraries in the United States and Canada was conducted to obtain information on whether and to what extent these libraries offered reference services to students by telephone. Survey results showed 89 of the 93 responding libraries reporting that they offered some form of telephone reference service to students. Most of these libraries respond to a substantial number of calls each day rather than an occasional call. Telephone reference in these libraries takes place in the reference department as opposed to a separate telephone reference desk, and the majority of libraries have established some sort of organizational pattern which facilitates telephone reference service. Telephone reference also is usually budgeted for as part of the reference department. Most librarians surveyed felt that any problems incurred were the result of logistics and could be remedied easily. Librarians also felt that telephone reference is popular with patrons, as evidenced by constant demand and expressions of appreciation from patrons. Most libraries also reported that the telephone reference service received the approval of the library administration. A copy of the survey instrument with tallies of the responses is appended. (EW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
W.W. Scott
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED307881

TELEPHONE REFERENCE SERVICES IN UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES: A SURVEY OF SERVICE TO STUDENTS

W. W. Scott
Morris Library
Southern Illinois University at Carbondale

ABSTRACT

This paper reports the result of a survey of 89 of the 96 ACRL Libraries in the U. S. and Canada. The survey was made to determine if and to what extent these libraries offered reference service to students by telephone. The paper concerns itself with the prevalance of telephone reference service, the organization of reference departments which offer this kind of service, and the perceptions of the librarians who serve their public, at least in part, by telephone.

INTRODUCTION

The notion once popular among librarians that academic libraries possess a "captive audience" has subsequently given way to a concern for a more diverse form of outreach. With the advent of microcomputers and other telecommunication devices and technologies, e.g. computers in dormitory rooms, some of the interaction between the library staff and the students served by the library is removed from the library building. Librarians will be interested in the further

IR053769

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

development of the potential of the technology they already possess, as well as the maximization of new technologies as they appear. One item, currently present in every academic library and which will be instrumental in doing this, is the telephone. This paper advances the contention that even in the computer age of remote access and reference in a networked environment, it will be impossible to access by computer every bit of information in the library. Hence the telephone will be a viable auxiliary to other kinds of library technology. It seems advisable, therefore, to examine the existing practice of a group of academic libraries. Because the student population is the largest segment of the university, the focus will be on service to students as opposed to other groups in the university community.

This paper presents the results of a survey of a group of university libraries to determine to what extent the telephone is used by the students of these institutions to request information from the library.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

In the February, 1897 issue of the Library Journal, under the heading, "New Aids for the Reader", appears an announcement that a public telephone has been placed in the Boston Public Library[1]. The article further stated that the stenographer in charge of the telephone would furnish, "either verbatim, or in abstract, copies of the records of the Public Library or records located in libraries in the vicinity."[2] According to Elizabeth Stone in her chronology of librarianship, the telephone mentioned above was not the first tele-

phone placed in a library[3]. Dr. Stone states that as early as 1878 (A little more than a year after the installation of the first telephones for public use[4]) two branches of the Library Company of Philadelphia were connected by telephone for the purpose of making available to subscribers of the library information located in the library.[5]

Written records of the first telephones placed in, or used by, academic libraries elude us. As a matter of fact the literature of librarianship contains surprisingly few references to use of the telephone in academic libraries. A study relative to the use of the telephone reference service in academic libraries appeared in the last decade.[6] It is only incidently related to the contents of this survey and its objectives, and hence does not lend itself to discussion as part of this paper.

THE SURVEY

A questionnaire was sent to the 96 University libraries listed in ACRL Statistics for 1983-1984[7]. The questionnaire was sent to the chief reference librarian of each library with instructions that the answers to the questions be confined to the main library as opposed to divisional or departmental libraries.

The questionnaire consisted of 16 items, 4 of which contained 2 parts thus the questionnaire required 20 answers. The questions can be divided into 3 groups : (1) the prevalence and nature of telephone reference service: (2) organization for and maintenance of telephone service by the libraries: and (3) staff perception of and commitment

to telephone reference service. For the purpose of this analysis the questions have been rearranged so as to fit into the related groupings. A copy of the survey instrument containing tabulated results is appended to, and is part of, this paper.

Librarians were encouraged and welcomed to make comments, or suggestions germane to the questions asked in the survey. Respondents did make suggestion, comments, and statements which qualified the answers given to some of the questions. These comments are discussed in the analysis where appropriate.

ANALYSIS OF THE SURVEY

1. PREVALENCE AND NATURE OF TELEPHONE REFERENCE SERVICE.

Of the 93 libraries who responded to the questionnaire 89 reported that they offered some form of telephone reference service to students. It is this group which forms the basis of the survey, 76 of the 89 libraries said that they received at least several calls each day, 8 said 1 or 2 calls each, 3 reported 1 call on an average of every 2 or 3 days, 2 did not respond.

Telephone reference service is an integral element of the responsibility of the reference staff of the 89 libraries who responded to the survey, 5 had separate desks to which telephone questions were directed. The remaining 84 replied that telephone services were provided by the reference staff, both the professional and

paraprofessional, or clerical staff members. It appears that in a large number of the libraries surveyed, that telephone service had been a part of the reference section for as long as anyone could remember. The specified number of years ranged from 1 year to 30 years. The mode was 20 years. From this it may be concluded that practice is well established.

The next question attempted to ascertain whether students were encouraged to call the library for information and assistance. Twenty-eight responded that requests by the telephone were encouraged. Sixty-one said no. The 61 who replied in the negative often qualified their statement by saying that no caller was ever turned away. Some stated that calls were neither encouraged nor discouraged. Others said that the concern of their libraries was instruction--how to find information and use reference tools--as well as information, therefore, it is preferred to have students obtain their information first hand rather than by telephone requests. The 28 who encouraged telephone requests were asked to indicate the method by which the service was publicized. The methods of publicity included bibliographic instruction classes, library orientation tours, literature given out by the library, word of mouth, and by other informal means. It was pointed out by some libraries that the telephone numbers of the reference departments were listed in the student directory. A few libraries listed their telephone number in their campus newspapers.

Because the organization of a department often bear some relationship to its operation and function, an attempt was made to deter-

mine how many libraries had a centralized reference department, and how many had decentralized departments. Sixty-nine libraries have centralized reference departments, 19 have decentralized departments. One mentioned a combination of a central desk and subject reference desks.

2. ORGANIZATION FOR TELEPHONE REFERENCE SERVICE.

The second part of the questionnaire covered the organization of the reference department for the telephone reference service which it performs. When questioned about the origins of the telephone reference service at their institution, 26 libraries indicated that it simply evolved as part the activities of the department and was never thought as being separate or distinct from it. In the case of 28 libraries it was the outgrowth of an idea which began with a member of the staff of the reference department, 18 admitted having no knowledge of how the practice began in their library, and of those 18 approximately one half stated the service predated anyone currently on the reference staff. Seventeen respondents failed to reply to the question.

Fifty-one libraries have some sort of guidelines, or regulations which govern the conduct of telephone reference service. Thirty-six stated that they have no formal guidelines, but that librarians were encouraged to use their judgement in dealing with a particular situation. Two failed to respond to the question. Some of the responding libraries indicated that the telephone guidelines were stated in, and a part of, the reference department manual. In an

effort to serve the public more effectively and to provide support for the clerical and paraprofessional members of the department, 79 of the 89 libraries in the survey provided communication channels whereby questions which could not be answered by clerical or papaprofessionals were referred to the professional librarians. In every case telephone reference work was done by all members of the reference staff as opposed to some one individual or group of individuals assigned to "telephone duty."

Questions which do not fit into the category of "ready reference questions" are dealt with in one of several ways: (1) A number is requested from the student and a return call is made to provide the requested information as in the case of 50 of the responding libraries; (2) The student was asked to come to the library where assistance is provided is the practice of 22 libraries; (3) 32 libraries said they followed whichever was the most expedient course in a given situation. The total number of replies is equal to more than 89 or 100% of the total. Some respondents checked more than one answer. Other said they did all of the above depending on the circumstances and the amount of business at the given time.

Service is given generally without concern for whether a question or request is class related. Sixty-eight respondents said that the question was never asked of callers. Twenty-one gave what was generally a qualified yes. A summary of their statements are as follows: when a student would benefit by using a given reference source; when the length of a request indicate that an assignment is involved and the student should be doing their own work; or when the librarian feels that it is beneficial to know if a rash of assignments is to be anticipated.

Having established that telephone service is considered part of reference service, it is not surprising that 81 respondents stated that no kind of budgetary provisions were made for telephone services. 5 said that there was. Of these 5 one indicated that the expenditures were for equipment e.g. answering machines, rather than staff. One respondent said that thought was being given to fee-based telephone reference service. Three libraries failed to respond to the question. When asked if it was felt that there should be budgetary provisions made, 77 said no, 3 said yes, 9 did not respond.

Sixty-nine respondents felt that telephone reference service to students had posed no problem or hindrance to the work of the reference desk. Of the 20 who felt that it did, 16 stated that the problem lay in calls which came at busy periods or when the reference department was short staffed. Some of the respondents mentioned that this problem was solved by setting priorities in the form of written guidelines..

3. PERCEPTIONS OF TELEPHONE REFERENCE SERVICE BY REFERENCE STAFF MEMBERS.

The final group of questions concerned the way reference librarians perceived the service they rendered for their unseen clientele. There is some overlap between the questions in this section and some of the questions asked in other sections. e.g. question number 10 (see appendix) asked if the idea of telephone service came from the reference staff, the second largest number of responses to this question indicated that this was the case. This is a

definite indication of the feelings of the reference staff that the service which is being performed by them is worthy of their effort. One of the question which bear on this section was "would you describe this service as being popular?" Fifty-six or 62% said yes. More than half of those who responded in the affirmative were helpful in arriving at a definition of popularity. They stated that popularity could be measured either by the number of users, or by the expressions of appreciation to the library staff for services rendered. Another overlapping question from the section on organization was, "Has the service posed any problems?" The majority felt that it had not. The ones who responded in the affirmative stated in summary that the problems lay in priorities and logistics rather than the service itself.

Finally to the question, "Has this service enjoyed the approval of the library administration?" A choice of 3 responses was given: "Yes," "no," "somewhat." There were 69 who said yes, 11 said somewhat, and 9 persons did not respond.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper has presented the results of a survey of telephone reference service offered to students of institutions whose libraries hold membership in the Association of College and Research Libraries. Questionnaires were sent to the 96 libraries. Ninety-three or 96.8% responded. Of the 93 who responded 4 said they offered no telephone reference service to students, 89 said that they did. The 89 libraries (consisting of 95.6% of the total) who responded in the affirmative became the segment of the 96 libraries from which the data

for the survey is drawn.

By way of summary the following observations relative to telephone reference service in Academic Libraries are offered:

1. Eighty-nine of the libraries who responded to the questionnaire or 95.6% of the total of libraries offer some form of reference service by telephone to students.

2. Most libraries respond to a substantial number of calls each day rather than an occasional call.

3. Telephone service in the majority of libraries takes place in the reference department as opposed to a telephone reference desk which is separate from the reference desk.

4. The majority of the libraries surveyed have established some sort of organizational patterns which facilitates telephone reference service.

5. Because telephone reference service in the great majority of the libraries, is part of the reference department, no separate budgetary provisions are made for same.

6. Most of the librarians surveyed felt that any problems incurred were the results of logistics and could be remedied without excessive effort.

7. Librarians felt that telephone service is popular with their patrons. This is evidenced by constant demand and by expressions of appreciation from patrons.

8. Sixty-nine libraries stated that telephone service received the approval and approbation of the library administration.

The implication of the evidence gathered from this questionnaire is that telephone reference service to students is a viable function of the library which bears further exploration. The purpose and concern of this survey was to provide some idea of what is currently being done, and to the extent that it can be determined, how effective the efforts of the library have been in this area. It is the hope of the writer that more studies will be forthcoming. For example what is the student's point of view relative to receiving information by telephone rather than coming to the library? In the event that a library finds that telephone reference service is in demand what effect will this have on the organization of the reference department--both the collection and the staff? To what extent might it prove a partial solution for crowded or noisy conditions of libraries? These and other related questions and their resolution will provide a basis for the expansion of telephone reference services in academic libraries.

References

1. "New Aids for the Reader." Library Journal. 22 (February, 1897) P. 88.

2. Ibid.

3. Stone, Elizabeth W. American Library Development, 1600-1899. (New York: H.W. Wilson, 1977) P. 231.

4. Casson, Herbert N. The History of the Telephone. 6th ed. (Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1911) P. 54.

5. Stone. P. 231.

6. Jirjees, Jassim M. "Accuracy of Selected Northeastern College Library Reference/Information Telephone Service in Responding to Factual Enquiries." (Ph.D. dissertation, Rutgers University, 1980.)

7. ACRL University Library Statistics, 1983-1984. A compilation of Statistics from eightly-six non-ARL University Libraries. (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 1985.) P. 2.

APPENDIX

SURVEY OF TELEPHONE REQUESTS BY STUDENTS IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

INSTRUCTIONS

This questionnaire should be completed by the librarian who is in charge of, or who supervises the delivery of, reference services. In the event that your library consists of several departmental or division libraries, please confine your answers to the Main Library.

Please Circle The Correct Answer

1. Does your library reference department provide any type of telephone reference/information service to the students enrolled in your institution? Yes-89 No-4

   If yes, how often? Several times daily-76 Once or twice each day-8 Once every three or four days-3 No response-2

2. Is your reference department centralized or decentralized?
   Centralized-69 Decentralized-19 No response-1

3. Do you have a desk which is identified as the "Telephone Information Desk" or by some other similar name?
   Yes-5 No-84

4. Are there guidelines or regulations, which govern the conduct of telephone information service? (e.g. what kind of requests are taken, how much time is devoted to each question, etc.)
   Yes-51 No-36 No response-2

5. When a telephone call consists of a question which does not fit into the category of "Ready Reference" questions, how is the question handled?

   a. The student is asked to hold the line while the information is located-5
   b. The student is invited to come to the library-22
   c. The answer is looked up and the student called back-50
   d. All of the above depending on the busyness of the staff-32

6. Are students encouraged to call the library for assistance with information needs? Yes-28 No-61

   If yes, how is the service advertised or publicized? Please specify.

   By Library publicity literature, Library instruction classes, orientation tours, campus newspaper, student directory , word of mouth.

7. Upon receipt of a request for information, is any attempt made to determine if the information requested is class-related?
   Yes-21 No-68

8. How is the telephone information services desk, or department staffed? Please circle the correct answer.

   a. By an individual or group of individuals whose responsibility it is to serve this function.
   b. By all members of the reference staff-89
   c. By some other method-0 (Please specify)_____

9. Approximately how long has your library provided this type of service?
   Range-1 to 30 years Mode-20 years

10. How did the service originate?

    a. At the request of students-0
    b. At the request of faculty members-1
    c. Was the idea of the reference staff-28
    d. Other (Please give details).
       Evolved with the department-26
       Don't know-18
       No response-16

11. Has the service enjoyed the approval of the library administration? Yes-69 No-0 Somewhat-11 No response-0

12. In case the telephone is attended by a paraprofessional or clerical person are there channels whereby the difficult questions may be referred to professional librarians?
    Yes-79 No-2 No response-0

13. Are there budgetary provisions made for telephone reference services? Yes-5 No-81 No response-3

    If no, do you feel that there is a need for such?
    Yes-3 No-77 No response-9

14. Has this type of service posed any problems in terms of time, desk coverage, etc.? Yes-20 No-69

    If yes, please comment.
    None of the 20 who responded in the affirmative qualified their answers.

15. Would you describe this service as being popular?
    Yes-56 No-21 No response-12

16. Does the service you provide by telephone extend beyond that of answering reference questions? (e.g. Do you accept and fill out forms for Interlibrary Loan requests, work with the Reserve Room librarian to place books on reserve, place personal reserves on books which are desired by patrons, but are presently in circulation, pull books from the shelves to be held and picked up by the patron at his or her convenience?)
    Yes-18 No-69 No response-2